
LOCKE ON THE ORIGIN AND STRUCTURE OF IDEAS

Text source:

*Essay Concerning Human
Understanding*, bk. 2, ch. 1-3, 5-7

‘Ideas’ in Early Modern Philosophy

- Descartes had reintroduced the term “*idea*” in philosophy.
 - As Locke says, its standard definition is “***whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks***” (EHU 1.1.8, 2.1.1).
 - The term is thus used to cover a motley array of mental contents, covering *all* types of mental states, including:
 - **Perceptions** (e.g. the perception of a house)
 - **Feelings and sensations** (e.g. toothaches, hunger etc...)
 - **Thoughts**, including...
 - Thoughts of *particular things*.
 - Thoughts of *general things and properties* (a.k.a. ‘concepts’)
 - Thoughts of *propositions*
 - **Note that our supply of ideas defines the very limits of what is *thinkable* or *conceivable* by us.**
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Possible sources of ideas:

- “**Adventitious ideas**” come from experience (e.g. the idea of the color red, or of the smell of lavender, etc...)
 - “**Innate ideas**” are inborn in the mind as part of its natural endowment (e.g. the ideas of God, substance, identity, etc..., at least according to innatists, though not of course Locke, who rejects the existence of innate ideas)
 - “**Factitious ideas**” are constructed by the mind from simpler ideas (e.g. the idea of a centaur or of a gold mountain)
 - While previous philosophers tended to think of the third class as rather uninteresting (typically involving fictitious ideas such as the idea of a unicorn, the idea of the Land of Oz etc...), Locke thinks lots of our most important ideas stem from this source (including, for instance the ideas of **God, infinity, substance, moral rightness & wrongness**).
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Locke's Theory Concerning the Origin of all our Ideas

- We get all our **SIMPLE IDEAS** from experience. Simple ideas are uniform in the following way: *“each [is] in itself uncompounded, [and] contains nothing in it but one uniform appearance, or conception in the mind, and is not distinguishable into different ideas”* (EHU 2.2.1).
 - All our simple ideas come from experience, either from **SENSATION** (outer experience: observation of external things through the five senses) or from **REFLECTION** (inner experience: observation of the internal operations of our own minds) (EHU 2.1.2-4).
 - The mind is *passive* with respect to its simple ideas: these are simply written on it by experience.
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Locke's Theory Concerning the Origin of all our Ideas (*continued*)

- The mind can then combine and assemble these various simple ideas together to form **COMPLEX IDEAS** (e.g. the mind can form the idea of a gold mountain, a centaur, or an all-powerful and all-wise being, even though it has never experienced such a thing).
 - The mind is *active* with respect to the complex ideas it assembles.
 - So ultimately *all* our ideas can be traced back to simple ideas whose origins are in either sensation or reflection.
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THREE SORTS OF OPERATION THE MIND CAN PERFORM ON IDEAS IN ORDER TO CONSTRUCT 'FACTITIOUS' IDEAS

- **COMPOSITION** (EHU 2.11.6)
 - Putting together (relatively) simpler ideas to build more complex ideas.
 - **COMPARISON** (EHU 2.11.4)
 - Bringing two ideas (be they simple or complex) by one another so that they can be surveyed together, without uniting them. This gives us our ideas of relations (X is ***shorter than*** Y, X is ***brighter than*** Y, X is ***stronger than*** Y, etc...)
 - **ABSTRACTION** (EHU 2.11.9, compare also 3.3)
 - Abstraction produces general ideas (a.k.a. concepts in modern philosophical terminology], like the idea of blueness *in general*, the idea of gold mountains *in general* -- rather than the idea of this *particular* shade of blue, or the idea of this *particular* gold mountain.
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